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AUTHOR Emery, Laura
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ABSTRACT

Many writing teachers agree that peer review is a beneficial experience for student writers. Recently, this experience has also been made available to faculty members at San Diego State University through a faculty writers' workshop. In the workshops, listeners give constructive criticism while at the same time pointing out what works well and what is effective. Because participants in the workshops are members of different departments, they are sometimes more comfortable sharing unfinished, imperfect drafts in this situation than they would be if they were showing an incomplete product to members of their own department knowledgeable in the subject area. On those occasions when papers are not comprehensible to non-experts, the basic issues of audience, focus, and clarity emerge and authors are able to revise their work. Very often, the group concludes that the first few pages of an article could be deleted or drastically cut in order to bring the main idea directly into focus. Although finding a time to meet that is convenient for a majority of people is not easy, the pressure on college faculty to publish serves as an incentive for teachers to attend the workshops. Overall, the response has been positive and members of the workshop share a common bond. (DF)

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Laura Emery, Ph.D.
San Diego State University

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WORKSHOPPING FOR FACULTY
REPORT TO CCC THINKTANK

Most writing teachers are aware that the sharing involved in peer review, exciting and valuable in many ways, makes concrete the idea that writing succeeds by contacting a reader. How much writing we have done in isolation. How deeply we can become entrenched in ourselves as we write, whirling or trudging along, depending on our wont, as though we were trying to address a room full of people by standing in the corner, facing the wall, talking to ourselves. The value of making peer review part of our process lies in turning our focus around, liberating us from the isolated corner. It can be exhilarating, like hug therapy, and until recently we have offered this process only to students.

Now, however, at San Diego State, the faculty writers' workshop is offering this experience to faculty, who are people too, needing live readers for their writing, needing to be liberated from isolated corners. We have found that a support group, meeting to share writing for publication or presentation, provides a needed boost for faculty across the curriculum. A faculty writers' workshop provides an opportunity for thinkers to become writers, capturing and shaping the whirling streams of ideas not yet mastered. The workshop helps faculty to give "airy nothingness/ a local habitation and a name."

When we began, many of us felt as if we had just joined faculty writers anonymous: "My name is Laura, and I am a procrastinator, guilty of not writing." In the process of getting acquainted, nearly everyone present at our first meeting mentioned goals in the same breath with procrastination, problems, and fears. At that point, we laid some ground rules: no one is out to get anyone; you ask for the kind of comments you want.

The result is a balm for feelings of exposure. Listeners, while aiming at constructive criticism, always give support by pointing out what works well, what is effective. At the same time, the workshop banishes procrastination. As soon as a participant signs up to present a paper on a given Friday, the deadline provides a spur for doing the writing. Guilt disappears with achievement, and that achievement is what the workshop promotes. Although most people feel discomfort when faced with exposing what might possibly be an imperfect piece of writing, a combination of relief and exhilaration soon outweighs the discomfort. Part of the relief, I think, comes from putting an end to procrastination and the burden of guilt. But the exhilaration seems to come from making

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progress toward clearer expression, from discovering new layers of ideas, and in many cases from getting an article published.

The "across the curriculum" nature of our workshop also eases feelings about sharing unfinished, imperfect drafts. Writers might balk at exposing a recognizably unformed creation to esteemed members of their own departments, fellow experts in their fields. However, they find that they get very good feedback from faculty members in other fields. We have successfully dealt with papers from teacher education ("The competency testing movement, CBEST and pitfalls); African literature ("On the early works of Mongo Beti"); nursing ("Towards Changing Nurse-Physician Relationship"); Environmantal Design ("Design requirements for the elderly in a public shopping facility"); English composition (now published in College English: "The Exploratory Essay and College Composition"); English as a second language (reviews of research in teaching foreign languages); comparative literature ("On Valenzuela, Literature and the Political Crisis in Brazil"); economics ("Rationality and Irrationality in the Behavioral Assumptions of Homoeconomicus: The Case of Political Psychology") history, anthropology, sociology, math, psychology, English literature, technical writing, and specialized wisdom (advice about getting tenure). Criticisms and suggestions in such a mixed group are always buffered by the natural qualification, "I'm not sure what experts in your field would already know, but. . ." And such buffers make criticism much easier to digest.

We have been impressed with the universality of the reading-listening experience, regardless of department or field of expertise. Intelligent non-experts provide enormously helpful feedback for almost any writer, and possibly better feedback than fellow experts in the writer's field can give. As John Hayes points out in his discussion of the "knowledge effect," skilled writers who are subject matter experts" are likely to have more difficulty predicting the problems readers will have with their texts than outsiders.

Occasionally, of course, a paper seems inaccessible (in content) to non-experts. Even in these situations, however, the basic issues of audience, focus, and clarity emerge and all participants realize again how important it is to consider the kind of journal at which an article is aimed--the expectations of the editorial board that will consider it for publication, and the needs of readers who use that publication. Will they expect to have ease or pleasure in reading? Will they be content with a report that does nothing to alleviate the dryness of its findings or to clarify their significance? Does the particular journal promote passive or active voice? or prefer long or short articles? Often, when an artile is presented we find

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that the writer's voice and presence need to be strengthened, that defensiveness has permeated and weakened the writing. Just like students doing a first research paper, faculty writers may be dominated by sources, and reader-listeners can say "Where do you stand? I'm not clear at the beginning where we're going; I thought we were talking about one thing, but then suddenly it seemed we had shifted to something else."

When one writer shares a paper, and a reader responds "that really starts to move on page two; why not start the paper with something like that?" the process is working. The writer feels a rush of adrenaline, not inadequacy, and all participants feel energized and encouraged to risk similar exposure.

Sometimes a writer comes in with a paragraph--the germ of an article; then the writer's concerns and questions fencing in that paragraph become the focus of the session. A month later that same writer has an article to present, the outgrowth of the discussion. At other times a writer has a much worked over, well-developed piece of writing that has been turned down by a publication. Then we pool our experience and knowledge about a particular kind of journal and its audience, and find ways of refocusing the article for that particular audience.

Surprisingly often the group concludes that the first few pages of an article could be deleted or drastically cut in order to bring the main idea more directly into the foreground. Often, also, when the presenting writer begins to talk, expanding on or clarifying that main idea, the group responds with "Yes, that's exactly what you need to add to your article." At times like these we wish we'd had a tape recorder going. And some members do ask to have a session taped. The comments are often so helpful, that the writer wants to be able to go back and review them. And even more, the writer's own words of explanation need to be captured. "How do I know what I think, until I see what I say?" somebody says. It applies to writing, but it also applies to that special part of the process that occurs in the peer review.

Finding participants for a faculty writers' workshop might seem to be quite difficult because we are busy. But, with the system (or ourselves) pushing us to publish, faculty must write. Released time and research money help, but many of us still do not find it possible to get articles written, or talks prepared for presentation at meetings. We need help, and a writing workshop for faculty provides it.

Finding a time to meet isn't easy. We sent out a preliminary announcement to all faculty with a return questionnaire about times and interests. This inquiry

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yielded Friday after lunch as a time that would suit about eighty percent of those responding. So far we haven't been able to set up another time for the remaining twenty percent.

Writers responded enthusiastically to the initial questionaire; about fifty faculty from seventeen departments came to check us out. One group of five, working on book-length scholarly manuscripts, has continued meeting independently but not every week. The rest of us, about twenty, tried breaking up into several small groups--not by departments, but according to writing interests (writing for a general audience, writing scholarly articles, writing fiction or poetry). These small groups did not continue because many participants could not attend every Friday. Soon we agreed to be a single group, and each week six to eight--but not always the same people--now meet to discuss whatever kind of writing is being presented.

At the beginning, writers scheduled to present a paper did not distribute copies until the time of the meeting. They read aloud, discovering some problems through hearing their own words; listeners, following along, would jot down comments to discuss after the reading. Sometimes this worked very well. Eventually, however, many writers began distributing papers ahead of time, so that participants became prepared readers as well as listeners. When the paper being shared is a nearly final draft, this method seems to yield richer sessions .

Yet we have all been pleased to discover that sharing a very early draft--even the germ of an idea--can be extemely interesting to everyone and helpful to the writer. One session centered on a mere paragraph and the wish to bring into perspective the current emphasis on the "process approach" to teaching composition. We began with the writer's nagging question, "How did I (you) learn to write?" Our discussion covered a great range of possibilities, and the writer formed a completely new concept of what she wanted to address in her paper. Similarly, in the case of a rough draft on Othello, participants were able to help the author--an excellent writer hampered by the "knowledge effect"--see what she had not made clear to them, and decide what question she was trying to answer in her paper. Once engaged in the process of examining details, she saw so many possibilities, directions, meanings, so much richness, that she found it difficult to return to a single focus or to remember the needs of the audience. Listeners' responses bring the writer back to these major issues. And so it appears important that members be encouraged to bring in sprouting but not yet fully developed ideas.

When we first began meeting, we did not know each other. Now we often eat lunch together before the workshop, feeling

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almost as encouraged by making friends as we are by making progress with our writing. In an enormous institution where people commonly feel isolated, we share a feeling of collegiality and common interests.

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